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An Experiment With Discipline And a Recommendation For Change

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ABSTRACT

This research had a two-fold purpose: to compare a group of university students who had committed misdemeanors and subsequently had been convicted by civil authorities with a comparable control group on a number of matched variables; and to test the effects of disciplining those same college men who had committed misdemeanors such as disorderly conduct, intoxication, and underage drinking. Subjects for the experiment were thirty-one men who were convicted of misdemeanors during the 1966–67 school year. Fourteen of the subjects were disciplined in the traditional manner, i.e., university probation or warning. The remaining seventeen subjects were not contacted in any way by the university. During May, 1967 all thirty-one subjects were interviewed to determine their attitudes toward the police, the courts, the university, the law they violated, and the action taken by the university. Subjects were also asked about the effects of their experience on their parents and on their subsequent behavior. In general, no differences were found either between the misdemeanor or control groups; or within the misdemeanor group, between the disciplined and non-disciplined sub-groups. It was concluded that the policy of disciplining students convicted of misdemeanors may be of doubtful value.

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STUDENT PERSONNEL deans seemingly spend an inordinate amount of time disciplining college students involved in violations of civil laws. Most law violations by students are misdemeanors such as disorderly conduct, intoxication, or underage drinking. Do the results of disciplining students who have committed misdemeanors warrant the amount of time spent by student personnel deans on discipline? The purpose of this study was to attempt to answer the above questions, first, by comparing students at a large state university who have committed misdemeanors with students who committed no law violations; and second, by investigating the effects of disciplining students who committed misdemeanors.

Most studies of disciplinary students have attempted to identify differences between students who have committed legal or collegiate infractions and students who have not (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8). Some of these studies have found certain differences in: age, year in college, ACT scores, grades, college major, place of college residence, withdrawal rates, and personality factors. There have been conflicting reports concerning some of these variables, however. Williamson's (8) general conclusion that there are few systematic differences between the two groups nonetheless remains prevalent today.

Regarding the effects of disciplinary action on student offenders, little research has been published. In this study are presented the results of an experiment in which some student offenders were disciplined and others were not.

Sample

The subjects for this experiment were thirty-one undergraduate male students at The University of Iowa[1] who were convicted of misdemeanors by civil authorities between October 1, 1966 and May 1, 1967. Students convicted of larceny, felonies, and other serious offenses were not included in this study. To provide a control group, each of the thirty-one subjects was matched, using stratified random methods, on A.C.T. composite score, major field, year in college, marital status, and age with a student who had not committed any law violations.

Procedures

To compare the subjects who had committed misdemeanors with the control group and to reduce biased responses, questionnaires were sent by an independent non-university agency,[2] to both groups to obtain information about college goals, extracurricular activities, and attitudes toward the University. Using student record and questionnaire data, differences between the control and misdemeanor groups were tested by t-tests and χ^2 analyses.

In addition to comparing the misdemeanor group with the controls, an experimental procedure was carried out on the subjects who had committed misdemeanors. Prior to the fall of 1966, the University took disciplinary action, usually some mild form of probation, accompanied by disciplinary counseling with all students who had committed law violations. Begin-

Table 1.—Comparison of Misdemeanor and Control Groups

	Misdemeanor Group (N=31)		Control Group (N=31)			
	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	S.D.	Mean ($\bar{Y}$)	S.D.	r_{XY}	$t_{\bar{Y}-\bar{X}}$
Overall GPA	2.26	0.50	2.36	0.56	.38*	0.92
First Semester GPA 1966–67	2.03	0.78	2.18	0.81	.48†	1.01
High School GPA [1]	2.76	0.43	2.84	0.52	.13	0.60
College Goals: [2]						
Academic	6.28	1.18	7.16	1.34	−.32*	2.35*
Vocational	6.77	1.62	7.45	1.68	.20	1.78
Social	5.65	1.88	5.87	2.42	−.07	0.38
Nonconformist	5.23	2.62	5.00	1.85	−.09	−0.37

*P $\leq$ .05.
†P $\leq$ .01.
[1]n = 22 for high school grades because complete high school grade data were not available for nine of the matched pairs.
[2]Scored on a 0–9 scale with a higher score indicating that greater importance is placed on goals of that type. Items to differentiate between college goals (using Trow's subcultures) were taken from the Student Profile Section of the American College Tests (5).

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ning in the fall of 1966, male students who committed misdemeanors and were convicted by the civil courts were assigned numbers in chronological order of the disposition of their cases (court action included fines of from $14.00 to $100.00, work at a school for handicapped children or a night in the city jail). Students assigned odd numbers were arbitrarily placed in an experimental group and students assigned even numbers were arbitararily placed in a discipline group.

Subjects in the discipline group were disciplined according to traditional University policy. This included what could be called disciplinary counseling where the regulations of both state and University were discussed in some detail. Also, opportunity was provided for the student to work through his feeling concerning his involvement. Subjects in the experimental group were not contacted in any way by the University and did not know that the University was aware of their conviction by the civil court.

During May of 1967, subjects in both discipline and experimental groups were interviewed to obtain information about their feelings toward the police, the civil court action, the law itself, and especially about the way the University handled their cases. Items on the interview schedule are included in Table 3. Complete interview data

Table 2.—Chi-square Values for Comparisons Between Control (N = 31) and Misdemeanor (N = 31) Groups

Item	d. f.	x^2
Self-perceived extracurricular involvement:		
In College	2	2.35
In High School	2	0.79
Perceived faculty concern with students	2	1.17
Perceived administration concern with students	2	1.33
Part-time job during the school year	2	1.06
Most important reason for attending college	3	0.65

NOTE: No x^2 was significant beyond the P = .05 level.

Table 3.—Results of χ^2 Analyses Comparing Discipline (n = 14) and Experimental (n = 17) Groups on Responses to Interview Items[1]

Item Number	d.f.	x^2-value
1	1	8.7**
2	2	3.0
3	1	1.2
4	2	5.4
5	1	0.4
6	1	0.2
7	2	3.6
8	1	1.1
8a	3	0.7
9	1	0.4
9a	2	5.0
10	2	1.1
11	2	1.2

**p = .01.
[1]Interview items are listed below:
1. Were you treated fairly by the police?
2. As a result of your experience, have your attitudes toward police changed?
3. Was the court action fair?
4. As a result of your experience, have your attitudes toward courts changed?
5. Was the law you violated a just law?
6. Should the University have taken disciplinary action against you?
7. As a result of your experience, have your attitudes toward the University changed?
8. Should the University become involved with off-campus law violations of students?
8a. If so, should this involvement take the form of discipline or counseling?
9. Did you tell your parents about your law violation?
9a. Was their reaction positive and/or supportive?
10. In what way did your experience effect your inclination to violate the same law again?
11. In what way did your experience effect your behavior in general?

Table 4.—Responses of Thirty-one Subjects to Interview Items (Percentages)[1]

Response	Item Number												
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	8a	9	9a	10	11
Yes	73		80		43	30		67		83	72		
No	27		20		57	70		33		17	28		
Favorably		23		20			37					73	53
Unfavorably		20		13			6					0	0
No Change		57		67			57					27	47
Discipline									10				
Counseling									90				

[1]NOTE: Interview items listed in Table 3.

were obtained for fourteen subjects in the discipline group and for seventeen subjects in the experimental group. The null hypothesis that responses to interview items were independent of the group (discipline or experimental) membership of the respondents was tested for each item by a χ^2 analysis.

Results

Data comparing the misdemeanor group with the control group are presented in Tables 1 and 2. Comparisons are shown for grades, college goals, self-perceived extracurricular involvement, hours spent on part-time jobs, and general attitudes toward the University. Except for the control groups having more tendency to value academic goals than the misdemeanor group, no t or χ^2 value was significant ($p \leq .05$).

Parenthetically, while the misdemeanor and control groups were similar, there appeared to be some interesting though non-significant characteristics within these groups. The control group was more homogeneous on non-conformist (idealism) goals, while the misdemeanor group was more homogeneous on social goals. Besides these findings, the significant t-value for a variable new to the literature on discipline, i.e., academic goals, suggest the possibility that other variables not yet studied may relate to a tendency to commit misdemeanors.

Results of the χ^2 analysis comparing the discipline and experimental sub-groups of the misdemeanor sample on the interview items are presented in Table 3. Except in the case of the analysis of responses to Item 1, where the experimental group felt they were treated more fairly by the police than did the discipline group, the results of the χ^2 analysis indicate there were no significant differences between the experimental group and the discipline group in their responses to the interview items. Hence, relative to their responses to the interview items, the two groups may be treated as one group of students who had minor difficulties with the law. The responses of the combined group of misdemeanor subjects, i.e., experimental and discipline sub-groups, to the interview items are presented in Table 4.

The findings shown in Table 4 indicate that most students convicted of misdemeanors felt that they had not changed their attitudes about the police, the courts, or the University as a result of their experience. However, of the students changing their attitudes toward the University, 79 percent had a more favorable attitude. A substantial majority of the subjects felt that the court action was fair, notified their parents of the conviction, and found their parents to be supportive. Most felt that the University should not take or have taken disciplinary action against them, but rather that the University should express concern for the student by talking to or counseling with him in a free non-punitive atmosphere.

The significance to the students of their involvement in law violation is best seen when they respond to queries relating to the likelihood of similar involvement in the future, and to their behavior in general. Nearly three-fourths of the students indicated that the experience had had a favorable effect on their attitudes precluding future violations of a similar type. Over one-half of the students indicated that the experience had had a salutary effect on their behavior in general.

Discussion and Conclusions

The significant correlations reported in Table 1 imply that at least one of the matched variables of the misdemeanor and control groups was related to several of the variables under study, and would have resulted in interaction effects had they not been canceled by matching procedures. Controls against confounding affects seem to have been lacking in previous studies of disciplinary students. The present findings are an indication of a need for greater care in designing studies of disciplinary students. Follow-up studies with more variables, larger sample sizes, and different campus settings are suggested. However, the re-

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sults of the present investigation support previous studies which found few systematic differences between misdemeanor and control samples.

Significantly, regarding the effects of discipline, failure to discover major differences between the experimental and discipline sub-group's attitudes of the misdemeanor sample calls into question the justification of university discipline against students committing misdemeanors. If this finding which appears to be new to the literature is supported by additional research, considerable change might be forthcoming regarding the perceived role of discipline within student affairs.

The philosophy at The University of Iowa has been that the student, by virtue of the privilege of attendance, had a responsibility in his behavior both to the civil community and to the University. It was supposed that by holding the student responsible to both communities in the event of an indiscretion he would somehow internalize an attitude change which would preclude his being involved in further difficulty. The fact that the experimental and disciplined groups manifested little difference in their responses indicates that the civil justice alone seemed to have the main effect. The University sanction apparently fell short of its intended goal.

This study suggests that offices of student affairs might reevaluate their use of disciplinary measures for minor law violations. Apparently, police and court action suffice to make the point. In the writers' view, the university might assign to living unit advisers, typically more mature students, the role of counseling with minor law violators. This would, then, free the already beleaguered central staff of the student affairs office for the more appropriate task of program development and policy formulation. Colleges and universities apparently are moving away from the traditionally perceived role of the dean of students' staff that of being disciplinarians for the few, and toward their becoming advisers for the many. This research suggets that a move in this direction is appropriate.

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FOOTNOTES

1. The initial sample was composed of forty subjects, but eight withdrew from the University before May 1, 1967 and one did not respond to requests for an interview.
2. The assistance of the American College Testing program is gratefully acknowledged.

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